

The Quarterly Interview: Tony Stamatoplos

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-Edited transcript-

LOEX: *Where do you work? What is your job title and main responsibilities? How long have you been in this position?*

Stamatoplos: I work at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) as an associate librarian. I began here in 1994, and am a member of University Library's liberal arts team, and am the subject librarian for anthropology, geography, religious studies, and sociology. As such, I am responsible for collection development, instruction, and reference consultation related to those areas. I also am heavily involved in information literacy in first-year seminars and IUPUI's nationally recognized learning communities program.

Why did you decide to become a librarian?

I have always been service-oriented, and like most librarians, I love knowledge and information. During my graduate school research, I encountered serious challenges and began to contemplate how librarians might better serve researchers. A good friend had just completed a library science degree, and encouraged me to consider a career in academic libraries. I realized that it had a lot to offer me, and that perhaps I could bring to the field a unique blend of knowledge and skills gained from my academic and research background in anthropology, as well as my recent experience in human services. In particular, I saw opportunities to apply an anthropological orientation and ethnographic skills to various library services. It's also an opportunity to be involved in education, for which I have a passion.

When did you first do instruction? How has it changed over the years?

When I first did instruction in a library context, my teaching style was presentational and mostly skills-based, and I taught according to prescribed methods and content; creativity was not really an option. My real immersion into library instruction was at IUPUI. My teaching has evolved and rather than thinking in terms of what I should "cover," and what I should say or do, I use learning outcomes to frame my instructional activity. I now use a wider range of techniques, such as active learning, and resources. I am more conscious of the influence of classroom dynamics in learning, and incorporate that into my teaching. Overall, I believe I am much more creative and effective in my teaching.

What would you say is your teaching philosophy?

First, I have to say that I am unapologetically learner-centered. It's all about students, their needs, and what I can

do to facilitate and support learning. Learning is about discovery and transformation, so it should be exciting for both teacher and student. For me, teaching is collaboration between the teacher and students. I would characterize my approach generally as constructivist, probably influenced a lot by my study of anthropology and education. I think a lot about how students engage and participate in the learning process. I try to create positive and meaningful environments that encourage learning, as I guide students in the process. I always begin with "where students are" in their knowledge and skills, and try to build on that when I can. I try to understand students' needs in the context of their particular situations and objectives. I believe that good teachers are engaging, authentic, good listeners, and responsive. Good teachers use their intuition, which comes from their experience. When possible, I want students to "learn to learn," and embrace learning as a life-long endeavor.

Have you written an article or book that you are most proud of? Or is there some other work (e.g., a project) that you would like to highlight?

I often feel that my really good publications are still in my head or buried in notes and outlines. I am kind of proud of my 2009 *College & Research Libraries* article, "[The Role of Academic Libraries in Mentored Undergraduate Research: A Model of Engagement in the Academic Community](#)," 70(3), 235-249. Among other things, it clarified differences between types of undergraduate research in a way no one had before. I believe it made a good case for libraries developing new roles and strategies for engagement in student research. I have many ideas for publications related to improvisation in libraries and information literacy instruction. Perhaps *LOEX Quarterly* readers and LOEX 2012 participants will help me determine what would be most interesting and useful.

What books or articles influenced you?

Many. Among others, Geertz, Goffman, and Lévi-Strauss influenced me as an anthropologist. As a student of education, writings of people such as Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky influenced me. Bill Crowley's *Renewing Professional Librarianship* (2008) has influenced my thinking recently about librarianship more than any other book. I think Professor Crowley's philosophy of "lifecycle librarianship" captures the essence of our profession and gives hope and direction for its future. When I had just begun teaching LIS courses, I read Parker Palmer's book, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life* (1998), and it changed how I think about myself as a

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teacher. I read a lot on improvisation in various contexts. As a performer, Mick Napier's *Improvise: Scene From the Inside Out* (2004), really helped me "get it" in a new way. Reading it helped me to understand better my own responsibilities in improv, especially my responsibility to acknowledge fears and meet them head-on. Academically, Keith Sawyer's work on improvisation and creativity definitely influence me, especially his writings related to business and education. I particularly recommend two of his books, *Group Genius: The Creative Power of Collaboration* (2007) and *Explaining Creativity: The Science of Human Innovation* (2011, 2nd edition).

When did you first do improv?

Like everyone, I have improvised for my entire life—it's part of being human. Anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson describes life as "an improvisatory art." More formally, I began performing improvisational comedy about 15 years ago with *ComedySportz Indianapolis*. I struggled with it a bit at first; when I finally caught on, it changed my life.

Can you give me an example or two of an improv technique? How long do they typically take to master?

Improvisation entails interacting within a group in a particular way to spontaneously co-create something new, such as a scene, story, or piece of music. The basis of this process is *acceptance*, or what we call the "Yes, and..." principle. Everything else builds from this deceptively simple principle. As each performer says or does something, other performers accept it without question, and then add to it. This is the essence of how we create as a group. One way to learn and practice this is through improv exercises and games. We also use skills of paying attention, being in-the-moment, noticing patterns, and making connections. And, as with all forms of improv, we work within certain "structures." As jazz great Charles Mingus famously noted, "you can't improvise on nothing; you've gotta improvise on something." We have certain game and scene structures, and also play off of shared structures familiar to the audience, such as narrative and musical forms, social roles and relationships, and mental schemata. I took classes and workshops, and practiced regularly with a group; that's probably common for serious improvisers.

Most people can learn this skill at a very basic level in a short time, but to get truly good at it and make it a habit takes practice. Not everyone can master the skills at a professional performance level. With some training, however, most people will learn valuable skills they can build upon and apply in their work and in life. Our workshop at LOEX 2012 will introduce participants to the basics, and target specific ways to incorporate improv into information literacy instruction.

How do you feel the use of humor and improv techniques can be helpful in a library instruction situation?

Overall, improvisation skills help me engage effectively with students and facilitate classroom interactions. I believe my teaching is enhanced by the skills of paying attention to what's happening in the environment, noticing patterns, and making connections. Classrooms are dynamic environments, so teachers must be adaptable, responsive, and able to solve problems; improvisation enhances those abilities. Improvisation encourages me to trust my own knowledge and abilities, and to use my intuition. Improvisation gives me flexibility in the classroom, so I am better able to identify and capitalize on teachable moments. Besides using improv skills to facilitate discussions and collaborative learning, I sometimes use an improv exercise or game, such as *Word-at-a-Time-Story*, to model class participation and teamwork. After improvising a story spontaneously on an unfamiliar topic, students are willing to contribute to discussions and participate in other collaborative activities. At the beginning of a semester or class session, I sometimes use improv games as icebreakers or to encourage interaction. Bateson characterizes improvisation broadly as, "recombining partly familiar materials in new ways, often in ways especially sensitive to context, interaction, and response." This also describes an aspect of my teaching, so improvisation is an appropriate tool.

What do you say to people who don't consider themselves "funny" or that they are not "performers"?

When I encourage improvisation in teaching, I'm not promoting the use of humor *per se*. Because people often associate improv with comedy, they might imagine that improvisational teaching is about being funny in the classroom. My focus, however, is on the process and skills of improv, and their use as teaching tools. And these are learnable skills. To take an improvisational approach, one need not be naturally funny, or be an entertainer. Humor certainly can play a positive role in engaging students, but I only use it when it comes naturally and serves a purpose. I think all teachers are performers in a sense, but I see myself as performing *with* the students, rather than *for* them. For example, when I facilitate discussions or active and collaborative learning activities, I am essentially guiding the class in an improvisational performance. I feel improvising and performing *with* my students is more interesting and useful than trying to make them follow a script that may turn out to be incomplete or inadequate for their needs.

If attending LOEX 2012, you can learn more from Tony about creativity & improv in instruction by taking the pre-conference workshop, "Enhancing Creativity in Your Teaching: A Practical, Improv-based Approach to Thinking On Your Feet"